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ABSTRACT

During his long career as medical doctor, professor, lecturer, and author, Oliver Wendell Holmes produced, among other notable works, three novels designed to caution the medical profession against giving precedence to cures over causes in the healing process: "Elsie Venner," "the Guardian Angel," and "A Mortal Antipathy." Of these three "medicated" novels, "Elsie Venner" has attracted the widest audience, with its consistently vibrant heroine, whose ophidian traits enhance the psychological mystery of her nature and eventual revelation of her human desires. Similarly, "The Guardian Angel" and "A Mortal Antipathy" address the riddle of psychological ills--the main character in all three novels suffers from some degree of psychological malady diagnosed by medical doctors, who become central characters. Although Holmes is not considered a pre-Freudian, his portrayal of psychological disorders in the three novels yields his contribution to the rise of realism in nineteenth-century American literature and the need for humane and objective medical diagnosis in place of the demands of social customs and religious dogma. (MM)

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A "Convenient Medium of Truth": *Elsie Venner* and the Medicated Novels of Oliver Wendell Holmes

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During his long, distinguished career as a medical doctor, professor, lecturer, and author, Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894) produced, among other notable works, his famous *Breakfast-Table* series, beginning with *The Autocrat* (1857) and followed by *The Professor* (1859) and *The Poet at the Breakfast-Table* (1872). He wrote a milestone essay, *The Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever* (1843), warning physicians about contagion causing the deaths of new mothers; poetry, of which "Old Ironsides" (1830) is still remembered; and three novels: *Elsie Venner* (1861), *The Guardian Angel* (1867), and *A Mortal Antipathy* (1885). Of the three "medicated" novels, *Elsie Venner*, published two years after Darwin's *Origin of Species*, has attracted the widest audience, with its consistently vibrant heroine, whose ophidian traits enhance the psychological mystery of her nature and eventual revelation of her human desires. Similarly, *The Guardian Angel* and *A Mortal Antipathy*, allowing for Holmes's sentimentalizing and digressions from his main characters, address the riddle of psychological ills: Myrtle Hazard's visions of a river journey and her ancestors from centuries earlier, and Maurice Kirkwood's phobic fear of beautiful young women. Holmes's scientific and moral inquiry in the medicated novels, his "convenient medium of truth," as he phrased it in his first preface to *Elsie Venner*, is twofold: to oppose the Calvinistic doctrine of evil, most apparent in *Elsie Venner*, and to caution the medical profession against giving precedence to cures over causes in the healing process. Although Holmes is not considered a pre-Freudian, his portrayal of psychological disorders in the three novels yields his contribution to the rise of realism in nineteenth-century American literature and the need for humane and objective medical diagnosis in place of the demands of social custom and religious dogma.

Holmes first mentions the "medicated novel" in his second preface to *Elsie Venner*, a term he borrowed from a lady friend who "properly refused" to read what she thought would be a romance novel (Holmes, V, ix). "It is a medicated novel," Holmes explains, "and if she wished

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to read for mere amusement and helpful recreation then there was no need of troubling herself with a story written with a different end in view" (Holmes, V, ix). The central purpose of his story, Holmes continues, "was to test the doctrine of 'original sin' and human responsibility for the disordered volition coming under that technical denomination" (Holmes, V, ix-x). His scientific inquiries, through the guise of fiction, were at best a "convenient medium of truth" precluding factual medical conclusions. It is, however, Holmes's psychological probing in his three novels for which they are remembered. The label "medicated novel," although questioned by at least one scholar (John Stephen Martin, "The Novels of Oliver Wendell Holmes: A Re-Interpretation"), is applicable to Holmes's novels.

The main character in each novel suffers from some degree of psychological malady diagnosed by medical doctors or, as in *The Guardian Angel*, a seer, who become central characters. Excursions into behavioral traits and social and religious conditioning are common in the three novels, exemplified through Dr. Kittredge's comparison of science, religion, and free will in *Elsie Venner*; Holmes's commentaries on hysteria in *The Guardian Angel*; and in *A Mortal Antipathy*, Dr. Butts' reflections on medical papers addressing the symptoms of Tarantism, psychological trauma resulting from the bite of a tarantula, and Gynophobia, fear of women. Young characters in or anticipating the medical profession, furthermore, appear in each novel, and the narrator throughout *Elsie Venner* is an old professor at the Medical School. With the exception of *Elsie Venner*, the most convincing novel of the group, the reader doesn't easily forget that Holmes, the physician, is relating medical accounts with fictional overtones, but ones that serve, nevertheless, as steppingstones to the psychological realism of Henry James, William Dean Howells, and Sherwood Anderson.

Holmes, the chief spokesman for the affluent Brahmin Caste of Massachusetts, which included respected writers such as Longfellow, Whittier, and Howells, centered his novels in New England locales enlivened through Yankee local color and folk superstition. The first chapter in *Elsie Venner* deals solely with the Brahmin Caste of New England, setting the stage for the young paragon of Brahminism, Bernard Langdon, who takes a leave of absence from medical school to teach in rural villages. Of stout mind and body, Langdon, in his first teaching post at Pigwacket Centre, licks the class bully, Abner Briggs, Junior, and chases his fiendish dog Tiger from the school. His next assignment takes him to the Apollinean Female Institute, the school

Elsie Venner attends, in Rockland, a small village at the base of what the local inhabitants call The Mountain and nearby threatening Rattlesnake Ledge. Folk legends intensify the awe and fear of the rattlesnakes in the area and The Mountain. One infiltrating snake, an allusion to Holmes's anti-Calvinism, was said to have slipped into the village church and planted himself on the pulpit-stairs to listen to the "discourse which was a sweet Saviour in his Nostrils" (Holmes, V, 44), and another rattler, "as big round as a stout man's arm" and having forty joints, was rumored to have killed forty human beings (Holmes, V, 44-45). "Dead-Man's Hollow," also the subject of legends, darkens the Gothic atmosphere of the mansion-house where Elsie lives with her father, Dudley Venner, and the villagers fear the day when The Mountain will suddenly slide "like a garment flung carelessly on the nearest chance-support, and, so sliding, crush the village out of being . . ." (Holmes, V, 54). Elsie Venner, further exciting the throes of superstition, becomes the central character in the novel. The victim of poisoning from a rattlesnake bite her mother received before Elsie was born, the eighteen year old heroine displays ophidian traits symbolically linking her with serpents and evil.

Elsie, a loner who frequents the dens of Rattlesnake Ledge, displays both alluring and threatening features. Holmes describes her as "a splendid scowling beauty, black-browed, with a flash of white teeth which was always like a surprise when her lips parted" (Holmes, V, 77). Elsie's serpentine features consistently allude to her animal instincts: her entwined black braids pierced by a golden arrow, camel-hair scarf and black and white checkered dress like snakeskin, the gold chain she coils and uncoils around her wrist, her hypnotic stare and diamond eyes that flash in the dark, the golden *torque* she wears around her neck to hide her ophidian birthmark, her partiality to summer temperatures, and her low forehead that appears to flatten when she is angered. In a frenzy, Elsie dances to the whirling rhythm of her castanets, reads from Keats's "Lamia," and in a rage bites her South American cousin, Dick Venner, leaving painful scars as a warning of her lethal defenses. Her only confidents are Dr. Kittredge and her nurse, Old Sophy, an African who understands the true spirit of Elsie Venner and guards her from outsiders who probe her mystery and try to change her nature.

A conflict emerges when Elsie's cousin Dick, a Heathcliff type, attempts to win Elsie and inherit the Venner estate. In a jealous passion, Dick tries to strangle his rival, Bernard Langdon, with a lasso, but is thwarted by the old caretaker, Abel Stebbins, who speaks in

Yankee dialect: "Hold on there! What 'n thunder 'r' 'y abaout, y' darned Portagee . . . ? I knowed I'd ketch ye at some darned trick or 'nother 'fore I'd done 'ith ye!" (Holmes, V, 371), and Dick is banished from the village by Dr. Kittredge. A transformation occurs through Elsie's growing love for her teacher Langdon, and in a desperate plea urges him to return her love, but the proper Brahmin politely refuses, giving precedence to his career as a physician. At the end of the novel, Elsie dies, finally and totally human, but unloved, leaving Old Sophy to succumb by her grave beneath the predicted avalanche from The Mountain.

The Guardian Angel, Holmes's second medicated novel, addresses a more complicated psychological condition than Elsie Venner's ophidian flaw, but loses sight of its main theme, "The successive development of inherited bodily aspects and habitudes" (Holmes, VI, vii), in a distracting sequence of plot changes throughout the novel (Tilton 285). The heroine, Myrtle Hazard, whose parents died of the plague in India and left her an orphan at an early age, is raised by her aunt, Silence Withers, in the little New England hamlet of Oxbow Village. Myrtle, alienated from the community, grows up in a world of superstitious visions triggered by the portraits of Judith Pride, a stately Colonial belle, and Ann Holyoake, a martyr burned at the stake. Inspired by a family legend that the spirit of Ann Holyoake exercises "a kind of supervision over her descendants" (Holmes, VI, 23), Myrtle envisions her mother's characteristics in the martyr and sees her own physical features in the beauty of Judith Pride, hence, making them her guardian angels. Silence Withers, a do or die Calvinist, attempts to "break" Myrtle's will by locking her in the dark, cobweb laced garret, where the child later finds her Uncle Malachi hanging by the neck, and her preoccupation from that point on becomes escapism.

Conditioned through her dreams of a phallic river journey back to India, Myrtle attempts to flee from Oxbow Village in a rowboat but capsizes in the strong river current and is saved by Clement Lindsay, a young sculptor, who breathes life back into the near-drowning victim. During her recuperation, Myrtle faces a second psychological obstacle, hysteria, further complicated by the magnetic powers of young Dr. Hurlburt and the sexual advances of the Reverend Bellamy Stoker, the arch-villain of the novel. In a state of hysteria, Myrtle envisions a huge snake, "like the spiral of a mighty cable" (Holmes, VI, 185) coiling around her room and transforming itself into the evil Reverend Stoker, who hisses, "Come to my study to-morrow, and we will read hymns together" (Holmes, VI, 185). Byles Gridley, a prophetic retired

Professor of Arts, becomes Myrtle's ultimate guardian angel by sending Dr. Hurlburt away and saving her from the evil clutches of Reverend Stoker and the conniving lawyer, William Murray Bradshaw, who schemes for her inheritance. Myrtle begins to recover through the fatherly guidance of Gridley, author of *Thoughts on the Universe*, and her growing love for Clement Lindsay. In a final struggle with her inherited traits, Myrtle, playing the role of Pocahontas in a tableau performance, almost stabs a jealous rival but finds the will to restrain herself, and later she removes the protective talisman bracelet, "a kind of charm" (Holmes, VI, 409), she identified with Judith Pride. Unlike Elsie Venner, Myrtle Hazard finds happiness through her love for Clement Lindsay, who, after fighting in the Civil War, becomes her husband, and the human understanding of Byles Gridley, who opens the door to her self-discovery.

Holmes wrote his last novel, *A Mortal Antipathy*, when he was seventy-five years old. The least psychologically complicated of the three medicated novels, *A Mortal Antipathy*, as Holmes stated in his preface, is concerned with an "atmospheric impression" associated with a "terrible shock" leading to a phobia or antipathy (Holmes, VII, vi). Maurice Kirkwood, a twenty-five year old recluse, is the main character in the novel, who suffers his terrible shock in infancy when he is dropped from the arms of his beautiful cousin Laura and falls from the porch into a thorny bush below. Although physically unscarred, Kirkwood grows up in a world void of the close presence of attractive young women, his mortal antipathy, whose sudden appearance or anticipated proximity drain the color from his cheeks and leave him in a near catatonic trance. Superstition vies with his quest for a cure for his antipathy, such as a religious medal that will ward off evil spirits, and he envisions a beautiful young woman, his saviour, who will someday appear in a field or by a lake and through her affection and love cure his phobia.

Kirkwood resides in Arrowhead Village, alluding to the Wendell summer property in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and Melville's home nearby. The setting includes a lake with a girls' school, The Corinna Institute, at one end and a men's college, Stoughton University, at the other. Two closely related students from the Institute, Lurida Vincent, known as "The Terror" for her astounding scholarly ability and demands for women's equality, and Euthymia Tower, labeled "The Wonder," for her masculine but graceful agility, both become involved in curing, or attempting to cure, Kirkwood's antipathy. Dr. Butts, the physician-hero and center of the intellectual Pansophian Society, becomes

Kirkwood's professional analyst, probing the mystery of his fear of women.

On the road to discovering the cause of Kirkwood's malady, the novel lapses into digressions on poetry and novel writing and a number of essay topics: Kirkwood's three companions: the ocean, river, and silent lake; Dr. Butts' topic on the duty of a physician; an account of Tarantism, Lurida Vincent, who becomes a medical student, relates from an Italian journal; and a report on Gynophobia from the Biological Committee. Euthymia Tower emerges as Kirkwood's visionary woman, and with her Amazonian strength, a kind of shock therapy for Kirkwood (Small 131), saves him from a raging fire in the home where he is convalescing (Faderman 309-32). Soon after, she breaks her sentimental tie with Lurida Vincent by marrying Kirkwood (Parker 47-63), who, through the strength and love of his saviour, learns to live at ease in the atmosphere of pretty women, including his cousin Laura.

Elsie Venner, although more mysterious than psychological, remains the outstanding novel of the group for its convincing fictional heroine, whose ophidian presence is consistent from beginning to end, and Holmes's common sense approach to Elsie's condition, setting the pace for psychological realism in his remaining two novels. Elsie is torn between two different worlds revealing what Dr. Kittredge calls her "double being" (Holmes, V, 445). Through no fault of her own, she inherits serpentine characteristics from her mother that prevail until Langdon appears on the scene and she begins to sense the other new side of her nature—a desire to love and be loved, but Elsie's attempt to shed her snake-like nature for womanhood leads to her demise.

Elsie's pit viper tendencies mellow the more she is exposed to Langdon at school and in the Rockland township. During his investigation of a fissure in Rattlesnake Ledge, for example, Langdon is saved by Elsie when she stares down a huge *crotalus* with "flaming eyes" that is about to strike him (Holmes, V, 191). She blushes for the first time in her life when her villainous cousin Dick mentions Langdon, and later turns from Langdon's gaze at a social gathering. As a white fan-tailed pigeon dies in her hand, Elsie, though without tears, sobs and attempts to pray, and in a final gesture, gives Langdon her bracelet for the woman he will someday love. Elsie eventually becomes aware of her need for love, as Dr. Kittredge prescribed earlier: "She will not love any one easily, perhaps not at all; yet love would be more like to bring her right than anything else" (Holmes, V, 195), and in a dramatic response to Langdon's offer of friendship, she demands, "*Love me!*" (Holmes, V, 423). In this human act, Elsie releases herself

from her ophidian bondage but wanes thereafter when Langdon, in proper Brahmin fashion, excuses himself as merely a friend and, though sympathetic, turns toward his career as a physician and away from Elsie, who soon after dies from the lethal leaves of a white ash Langdon, unaware of their poisonous substance, places in a flower basket for her. The irony of situation is warranted, for it is not humanly possible for Elsie to completely replace one nature with another. As Kathleen Gallagher points out, the hopes of Dudley Venner and Dr. Kittredge that Elsie will someday be cured are never fulfilled: "One [hope] is that when the normal snake life cycle is past in her and dies, the woman will live on. The other is that love may somehow redeem her. This situation too is impossible. . . . As the snake dies, her woman's nature flowers, but death is inevitable" (59).

From a broader perspective, Elsie's "double being" permeates the general atmosphere of the novel. The contrast between societies and individual natures is indicative in varied behavioral patterns. Dick Venner struggles with his South American tendency toward heated passion and aggression and his New England Yankee conscience that cautions him about greed and injury to others. Langdon's congeniality and sympathy imply his inclination to marry his colleague Helen Darley, but his Brahminism urges him to follow his profession, suggesting the individual cultural diversity, that Holmes recognized, between the Brahmin Caste and the local Yankee townfolk, as Stanton Garner suggests is metaphorically implied in Dr. Kittredge's Book of Life (287).

In a long debate, the Reverend Honeywood, Doctor of Theology, and Dr. Kittredge argue the problem of free will in addressing religious and medical problems. The Reverend Honeywood maintains that if man's will is "governed by something outside of himself, . . . you have lost all hold on his moral and religious nature" (Holmes, V, 317). Dr. Kittredge contends that "*Conscience won't be reasoned with*" (Holmes, V, 317), that disease, like sin, "has something back of it which the body isn't to blame for, at least in most cases, and which very often it is trying to get rid of" (Holmes, V, 324). God, Dr. Kittredge concludes, is involved in the healing process by opening to physicians The Book of Life, which reveals the true need for human understanding at all levels of society, and that certain behavioral conditions are beyond our control and may never change (Holmes, V, 325). Elsie's ophidian affliction, hence, according to Dr. Kittredge's position, and Holmes's, is an inherited disease for which she holds no responsibility. Its cause, allowing for Holmes's "convenient medium of truth," is a physical

transference of venomous blood from mother to daughter, predating Rhoda, the Bad Seed in William March's novel (Hamblen 361-63), not a result of innate evil as defined by Calvinistic doctrine. Elsie's "disease," however, attempting to alter her nature, is incurable, and she dies void of her ophidian ancestry as well as the world of human love she eventually yearned for but only briefly felt.

From the standpoint of provocative characterization and plot structure in novel writing, Holmes's medicated novels fall to the wayside. But in terms of realism in his objective and moral approach to psychological disorders affecting given individuals and varied levels of society, Holmes leaned in the direction of modern technology, as later scholarship indicates. In his book, *The Psychiatric Novels of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, Clarence P. Oberndorf provides a full length study of each novel in light of the psychoanalytic thinking of Freud and Jung, drawing many interesting comparisons. In her chapter on Holmes's novels in the Twayne Series, Miriam Rossiter Small points out the correlation between the behavior of Holmes's characters and modern psychiatry. Elsie's condition, Small states, "would be *schizophrenia*, because she has the symptoms of isolation, introversion, and self-indulgence," and her death, in part a result of Langdon's unrequited love, would be *psychic suicide* (131). Myrtle Hazard's affliction with her ancestors suggests Jung's *collective unconscious*, and *psychic trauma* is the cause of Maurice Kirkwood's fear of women (Small 131). More psychological comparisons have been made in the three novels, but the point becomes clear that Holmes was ahead of his time in investigating the causes of emotional disorders from a medical as well as a literary position.

And in this respect we remember Holmes as a contributor to the liaison between science and literature, and as an early member of the modern circle of physician and scientist writers including Arthur Conan Doyle, W. Somerset Maugham, William Carlos Williams, Loren Eiseley, James Herriot, Lewis Thomas, and Carl Sagan. Holmes's "convenient medium of truth" urged poetic license in the medicated novels, but also provided a means by which he illustrated the contrasting views of superstition and dogmatic religion on one front and common sense medical diagnosis and humane understanding on the other. This disparity continues to be seen in more current events. The U.S. Supreme Court's recent barring of teaching Creationism in public classrooms where evolution is taught, for example, brings Darwin and the Scopes trial to mind but should also recall Holmes, whose sojourn with romance writing vied with religious authority and urged the

practical analysis and treatment of human disorders, in turn encouraging the rise of realism in the medical field and American literature.

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